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Harold Agnew's son gives Lab never-before-seen photos, documents

By Alan B. Carr, Senior Historian, [National Security Research Center](#)

When I arrived at Los Alamos in 2003, the Laboratory's long-retired third director was still a very popular figure.

He was so popular, in fact, that he enjoyed an honor typically reserved for only the most adored and outrageous pop stars and Brazilian footballers: He was known by one name. Back then, most Lab staff knew exactly who you were talking about when you referred to "Harold."

Harold Agnew was at the helm from 1970 – 1979, though his career here began when he was still just in his 20s. He was recruited to work on the U.S. government's top-secret project to build the first atomic bombs and help bring a swift end to World War II.

Harold died in 2013 at 92, but March 28 would have been his 100th birthday. Although he's no longer here to celebrate with us, we can gain inspiration by remembering his remarkable life of service – and mischief. Both are now well-documented in the collections of the National Security Research Center (NSRC), the Lab's classified library, which also includes unclassified pieces of our history.

The NSRC's newest addition to its collections comes from Harold's son John Agnew, who just recently gave me a box of about 250 images and about 15 documents that belonged to his dad. The contents are nothing short of remarkable, one-of-a-kind, and in some cases, hilarious.

As the NSRC staff are accessioning these pieces into the Lab's collections, looking through these materials is a chance for me to remember our former director and my friend.

Meeting Harold

I believe I was 26 when I was first introduced to Harold by my predecessor, Lab Historian Roger Meade, and the former head of the Weapons Program, John C. Hopkins. Harold was visiting the Laboratory to participate in a classified panel discussion on [Operation Castle](#). I had helped with the logistics for the event and had traded emails with Harold for months. His correspondence was blunt, had no regard for grammar and was rarely written in complete sentences. His unabashed communications – both verbal and written – along with his sense of humor and scientific prowess made him legendary and beloved.

In the years that followed, I continued corresponding with Harold. As a historian, I cannot overstate the significance of having direct access to the Manhattan Project and the Cold War through Harold. The man's memory was incredible. When I'd ask Harold questions about the past, he'd typically say something like, "Oh, I don't remember." That was always just a prelude for the incredibly detailed story that soon followed. After being supplied with the right catalyst, he then remembered everything. And Harold had the most incredible [stories](#)!

He was one of Enrico Fermi's students at the University of Chicago, he was on the team that produced the world's first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction, he [filmed](#) from an aircraft the rising mushroom cloud after the release of Little Boy on Hiroshima, and he was present for Ivy-Mike, the world's first full-scale thermonuclear test.

There was nothing better than listening to Harold tell stories, and fortunately a handful of talks he gave at the Lab were recorded. Over time, we became friends.

I remember picking-up Harold at the Albuquerque airport with now-retired Lab scientist Glen McDuff in 2012. His first words upon seeing us: “Take me somewhere where there are sopaipillas.” After dinner as we drove back to Los Alamos, he told us stories about being on Tinian Island, where the U.S. launched its attacks on Japan during the final days of World War II. Sadly, that was [Harold’s last visit to Los Alamos](#); he died the following year.

The Harold Agnew Collection

Earlier this month, I received quite a treat in my mailbox. Harold’s decades-old records have a distinct scent that I call archival musk. (Think old ink, plus aging paper, plus embedded cigarette smoke.) Now a part of the NSRC, Harold’s images and letters demonstrate he was not only a witness to history, but a maker of it.

- You will find a rarely seen image of the Hiroshima pre-strike briefing on Tinian Island; Harold can be spotted in the audience, sitting a couple of rows behind his wartime boss Luis Alvarez.
- There are also many prints of a portrait taken in 1952 of Fermi. Harold was the photographer, and let me tell you, Harold was very proud of that image and he frequently mentioned it in person and via email. On a piece of cardboard attached to the photo, Harold had written: “Very special. Best photo of Fermi ever taken. By me. My negative. SAVE.” Feel free to use the photo, but make sure you credit Harold M. Agnew as the photographer!
- There’s a lovely image of Harold’s wife Beverly, who he liked to claim was actually the one recruited to work at the wartime Lab and he came along as part of a package deal. Beverly worked as one of Oppenheimer’s secretaries and in different jobs at the Lab after the war, and also played a part in saving Fuller Lodge from being demolished by the Atomic Energy Commission. Beverly preceded Harold in death in 2011.
- There are images of Harold witnessing military maneuvers in Turkey when he was a scientific advisor to NATO in the early 1960s. Perhaps the most curious photo in the collection shows professional golfers Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus chatting with, it appears, Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, the then-Supreme Allied Commander of Europe. There’s an accompanying photo of Nicklaus hitting golf balls for the amusement of what must be half the U.S. military officers stationed in Europe. Harold enjoyed taking pictures and I have to wonder if he was the photographer for these images as well.
- Harold met many U.S. presidents – there are photos of him shaking hands with Lyndon Johnson and meeting with Gerald Ford at the White House. In another photo, Harold can be spotted in the background behind Richard Nixon. (Harold was a politician himself. He was the first New Mexico state representative from Los Alamos and played a prominent role in passing early anti-discrimination laws during an era when such efforts were far from fashionable.)

The documents in this collection are quite fascinating as well.

- [Harold’s account](#) of the atomic strike against Hiroshima includes: “It was frightening to realize that one bomb carried in one plane was capable of more destruction than all these other planes put together,” referring to the hundreds of U.S. planes returning after a bombing mission.

- Later on, because he was in contact with hazardous materials, Harold regularly had to provide urine samples to verify he had not been contaminated. Documents from March 1950 show Harold submitted beer instead of urine. The Lab's doctor noted "the rather startling fact that the specimen contained approximately 6% alcohol and considerably more than trace amounts of hops and malted barley" and, thus, he must surely be dead. Harold responded, "members of Group P-3 (Accelerator Research) are unique individuals and ordinarily an alcoholic content of the order of 6% in their urine should not be considered as unusual." It was a story he loved retelling.
- There's also a letter from Glenn T. Seaborg, a Nobel laureate and chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. He was writing to let Harold know President Kennedy wanted to host members of Fermi's University of Chicago team at the White House to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the first chain reaction. So, in total, Harold met Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Reagan. Not too shabby.

Legacy lives on in the NSRC

Preserving Harold's photos and documents in the NSRC safeguards the Lab's history – a history that he helped make. For instance, our workforce doubled in size while Harold was the director in the 1970s. He played an important role in technically diversifying Los Alamos by supporting new programs in many scientific fields. Our multidisciplinary institution was born during Harold's tenure as director. But his impact went beyond Los Alamos.

I recall someone once asked Harold what his legacy was and, without hesitation, he responded: "The stockpile." Harold played at least some part in the development of most of the nuclear weapons that entered the U.S. stockpile between 1945 and the end of the Cold War. He was very proud of that contribution to our nation's security, and I'm sure he would be proud of those who continue to maintain our nuclear deterrent today.

Happy 100th, my friend!

photos and captions are here:

UI-20210323-346-015 Harold Agnew Collection.jpg: These photos are included among the approximately 250 images, 20 negatives and 15 documents that belonged to former Lab Director Harold Agnew. His son recently gave the Lab's National Security Research Center these items, which are now being accessioned into the NSRC's unclassified collections.



Harold Agnew Collection.jpg: National Security Research Director Riz Ali and Senior Historian Alan Carr look through the Harold Agnew Collection, which are photos, negatives and documents. Many of the items are one-of-a-kind and have never been publicly shared before. They further preserve the Lab's history, Ali and Carr said, adding the Lab is lucky to be the recipient of Agnew's photos and documents.





Harold Collection Image 2.tif: Professional golfer Jack Nicklaus hits balls as U.S. military officers stationed in Europe watch. The photo was taken in the early 1960s when Harold Agnew was a scientific advisor to NATO. It is a part of Agnew's photo collection that his son recently gave to the National Security Research Center, the Lab's classified library. Agnew was the Lab's third director.



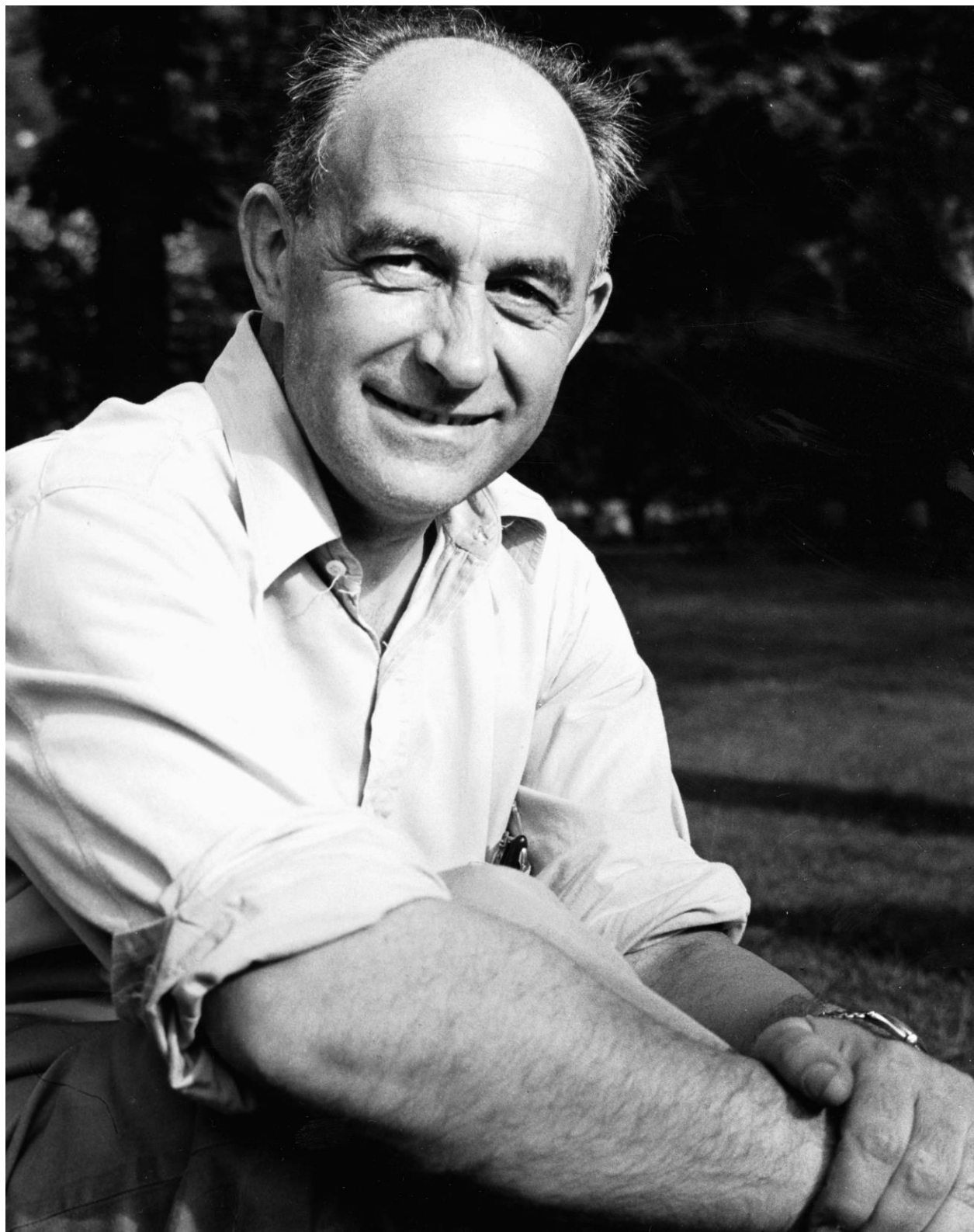
Harold Collection Image 19.tif: Harold Agnew is seen here attending a White House meeting with then-President Gerald Ford. Agnew, who was the Lab's third Director from 1970 - 1979, would have been 100 years old this month. He is remembered fondly.



Harold Collection Image 5.tif: Beverly and Harold Agnew were married May 2, 1942 and not long after, the couple moved to Los Alamos to work at the Los Alamos Lab during World War II. The couple had two children and were married for almost 70 years.



Harold Agnew's photo of Fermi.tif and Harold Collection Image 7.tif: This 1950s portrait of physicist Enrico Fermi was accompanied by a handwritten note from Harold Agnew noting -- proudly -- that he was the photographer. Fermi and Agnew both worked at the Lab during World War II, when it was part of the U.S. government's top-secret efforts to create the first atomic bombs.



Very Special
Best Photo of Fermi
ever taken, By me
my negative

SAVE
Taken
at on 45th
St while

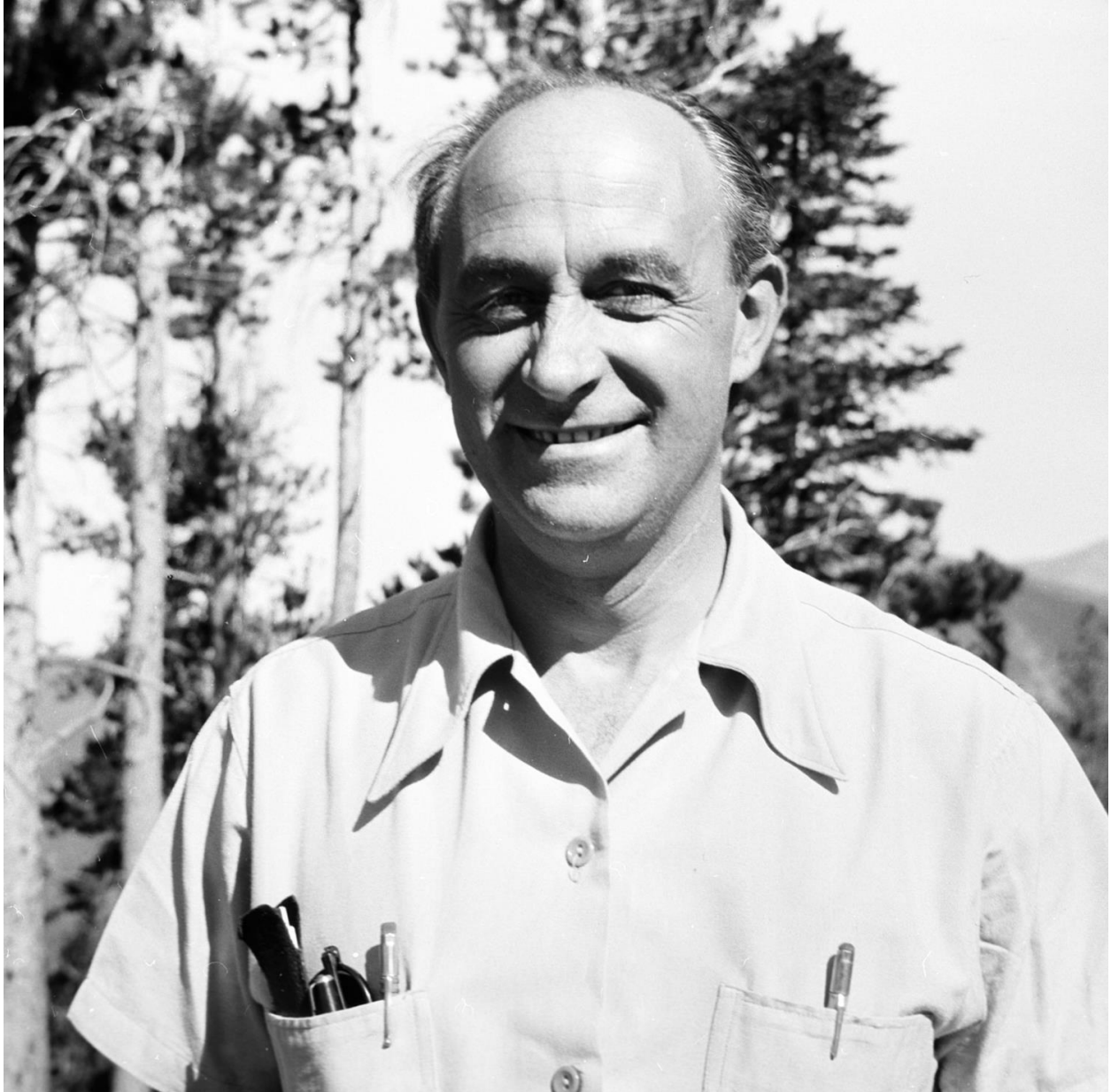
Burned down

see maybe
-51 period

FERMI

Fermi
SAVE

Harold Collection Image 6.tif: Many of the photos in the National Security Research Center's newly acquired Harold Agnew Collection have not been widely shared before, including this photo of physicist Enrico Fermi.



Harold Collection Image 15.tif and Harold Collection Image 16.tif: Former Los Alamos Lab Director Harold Agnew met five U.S. presidents, including Richard Nixon and can be seen in the background in this photo. In another photo, Agnew shakes President Lyndon Johnson's hand.

